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Absurdity and Angst in Select Short Stories of Sadat Hasan Manto

Abstract: The turmoil of the partition made people choose between the two sovereign states India and Pakistan. It made them forget their previous identities and belonging-ness, amidst the chaos of creating new nations based entirely on religious bias. There were cases of thefts, loots, rapes and inhumanity, anger and terror among the captured people. There were people who were marginalised, women (being the obvious) and they had to face severe repercussions, making them feel anxious, terrorised and angst. The inhumane situations that partition narratives portray clearly depict the absurdity that people at that time were unable to notice because of the violence and bloodshed that prevailed. Manto being a witness of the same, could capture the true essence and bring out lives of such marginalised people, their angst and the absurdity of the situations, through his short stories on partition. The stories selected for the study are 'Toba Tek Singh,' 'The Assignment', 'Khol Do', 'The Dog of Tetwal', and they work on Eugene Ionesco's thoughts that, man away from his roots is himself absurd and Kafka's and Camus' concepts of 'otherness', 'absurdity' and 'outsider'. The study brings forth the western ideas of 'absurdity' and 'otherness' to Indian context, especially through the marginalised victims of partition, and shows their angst through the short stories by an outsider himself. Also the fact that it is both angst and absurdity that Manto wanted to reflect through his stories to

mock the insensitivity of the people and ridicule the chaos, which never got the appreciation it deserved at its time.

The partition of India and Pakistan was a blot on the history of the once one nation. Millions died in the ensuing violence in the aftermath of the participation. From imperial perspective the British Empire lost much of its lustre after the loss of its 'jewel in the crown'. Partition riots and the mass migrations following the division of British India into two new sovereign countries: India and Pakistan has been well documented worldwide. The aftermath of the partition was horrid and created social, economic and psychological setbacks to all the innocent lives that were affected by the partition. Govind Nihlani very aptly states that partition is a sad reminder of the tragedy that results whenever the religious sentiments of communities are manipulated to fulfill political objectives.

The newly created states had to establish their identity on the basis of religion and had in their minds the poison of communal and religious disparity. Blood covered the cities and painted them red. Villages and fields were destroyed. Women faced double marginalization because of their gender as well as because they were colonized. Theft, police harassments, refugee camps became a common scene on both sides of the border.

At the time of the partition, the country was in a turmoil and the 'new citizens' were exhausted and struggling with partition, bloodshed, extreme violence and abuses. At such a time it became the duty of literature to revert people back to moral values, and impart the meaning and importance of unity, brotherhood and communal acceptance.

Partition literature not only documents the harsh realities and bitter memories of the refugees and the citizens, it also presents the resilience of the people who were worst affected by it. Partition literature spans all major literary forms: novels, short stories, poems and memoirs. The partition of India is a compelling literary theme that continues to inspire creative outpourings by writers. Perhaps it is both an attempt to process the tremendous trauma created

by partition, and to bear witness to the forces of communalism and class divide behind the violent division, which continue to play out across the Indian subcontinent to this day.

The present paper focuses on the anguish and absurdity of the partition through select short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto. Manto, the foremost writer of partition literature in India was perhaps the finest writers of his time. He earned the distinction of being a much maligned yet widely read short story writer in Urdu. He produced twenty two collections of short stories, one novel, few radio plays and three collections of essays. Born in 1912 in Samrala, a small village in Punjab, he himself faced the horrors of partition when he was forced to flee to Pakistan.

Manto's characters are generally the people who belong to the fringes of the society. The nameless, faceless people who had not been adequately represented in mainstream literature before, found a place in Manto's narratives. The stories written by Manto are extremely vivid, hard-hitting and objective. Manto's characters seemed to be struggling and fighting towards a search of bright white light of humanity, love, brotherhood, respect of women and above all unity. Manto only tries to give us a glimpse of the sordid lives of his characters sans his own judgment. 'He gave a commentary on abusive or insensitive application of power and its discontents, like Dickens, Kafka, Orwell and Coetzee. The vital insider's perspective allowed them to decipher the special, and at times cryptic languages and imperatives of the structures of power and authority.' (Siddique)

Even his contemporaries like Bhisham Sahni appreciated the way he would build his characters, their mental makeups, and their inner worlds and hence the psychoanalysis of both the writer and his characters becomes interesting and important. Since these characters are 'real' and have the very human makeup that is common to almost everyone, they receive humanistic impressions. These Characters, according to Sahni, though are in deep darkness, in their despair search for the bright white light.

The readers and critics of Manto's short stories acknowledged him as a master of the craft of weaving short stories that reflect the exact same situations prevailing in the society to which even Manto said, 'there is no fault in my writing. The fault attributed to my name is actually the fault of the system. How can I disrobe civilization, culture and society when it is in fact already naked?' (Manto, qtd by. Jalal, 2012)

Manto's stories were written and set in a period when people were so outraged and helpless that their only solace lay in stories. Manto being greatly influenced by the crimes, violence and bloodshed wanted to encourage people to find inner peace, restore humanity and emphasize the fact that the brotherhood of the two countries, which were once a single land couldn't be disturbed by a line drawn overnight. Manto rightly answers his critics by saying,

'Maybe my writings are unpleasantly harsh. But what have humans gained from sweet homilies? The neem leaves are pungent, but they cleanse the blood.'

'The idea that prevails in Pakistan is that Manto was against independence, and consequently against Pakistan. This, however, is untrue. He was against the damage the War of Independence unleashed: the senseless killings, irrepressible hatred, opportunistic plundering, and brutalities against both women and children.' (Hussain, 2013)

Manto throughout his life remained an Outsider in the society and the absurdity and anguish of his life find resonance in all his works, especially his short stories. The concept of Outsider and the 'other' is frequently used in modernist and existential fiction of writers such as Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. The term 'Literature of the absurd' is applied to works which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd. According to M.H. Abrahams, "man is a rational creature who lives in an at least partially intelligible universe, who is a part of an orderly social structure, and is capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat".

But, in the aftermath of the partition, the world turned chaotic and men turned towards the darkness of irrationality and the so called ordered social structure became topsy-turvy. Postcolonial critics believe that “‘ótherness’ together with ‘marginality and plurality’ can be seen as a source of energy and potential change”, but this link between otherness, change and energy seems to be missing from the life of Manto’s characters.

Eugene Ionesco wrote,

“..Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless.”

This feeling of absurdity and Otherness is very vividly represented by Manto in his short stories. Manto’s stories generally revolve around partition – yet there is no mention of ‘Hindu,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘India’ or ‘Pakistan’ in them. This is what makes them so striking, and relevant, even to this day and are so hard hitting since there is no ‘right’ no ‘wrong’ side, but all grey shades. Manto describes a completely new social and psychological space in which violence and “madness” is the norm. This is the space that belongs neither to India or Pakistan, but has been borne of the rupture of partition, and is, simply, human

Manto’s text is, one could say, an example of an alternative, ‘fragmentary’ representation of partition.

Stories like “Toba Tek Singh”, “Khol Do”, “The Assignment”, “The Dog of Tetwal” are a “fragmentary” representation of partition. He referred to the partition as ‘batwara’, feeling that it was one nation ripped apart that would lead to greater divisions and invoke hatred among the people of the subcontinent.

Toba Tek Singh was published in 1955, the year of his death. By setting the story in a mental asylum in Lahore a couple of years after independence, Manto generates comedy and uncomfortable satire. After partition, the governments of India and Pakistan decide to exchange Muslim, Sikh and Hindu lunatics. One lunatic is so bewildered with all the talk about partition

that he climbs up a tree and refuses to come down, saying “I don’t want to live in India and Pakistan. I’m going to make my home right here on this tree.” The insane mutterings of a Sikh inmate in a mix of Punjabi, Urdu and English, though nonsensical, clearly transmits disdain for the very idea of Pakistan and India, and the displacement it creates. The story ends with him dying in no-man’s land between the two countries.

As such women were victims of patriarchal society and norms the division between two countries made them face harsher circumstance than ever. The division was based on community/religion. Hence anguish among the two sects broke out into brutality, loots, massacres and communal riots that broke families, destroyed land and infrastructure and disrupted harmony. He once stated,

‘A man remains a man no matter how poor his conduct. A woman, even if she were to deviate for one instance from the role given to her by men is branded a whore. She is viewed with lust and contempt. Society closes on her doors it leaves ajar for a man stained by the same ink. If both are equal, why are our barbs reserved for women?’

Women in Manto’s stories survive the horrors of crime against humanity, rescuing and salvaging life when men turned to brutality and became communal butchers, and these brave hearts did not give up in the adverse times.

Manto’s views on women were appreciable though the portrayal of characters was always in dark, shady tones of prostitutes or rape victims or women who were accustomed to abuses and brutality. Yet those “heroines” had a positive note in them. He superbly portrays the angst and absurdity faced by his heroines through subtle yet effective words, examples of which are

From “Khol do”

‘The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her salwar tight around her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs’

As pointed by Gatt in his study, ‘Manto always has his hand at the pulse of his characters who are juxtaposed in various life situations, battling with the ills of society of their time like a true feminist he forcefully though indirectly pleads for the honor and self-esteem of his battered and bruised women characters’.

Facing severe criticism and oppressive censorship, Manto always felt like an outsider and the societal norms became absurd for him. This gave a new perspective to his stories. The writer could feel how it would have been to be not accepted by a society that one appreciates and accepts as his own.

Some examples of the reflection of the same are:

The dialogue of a lunatic from Toba Tek Singh,

‘If they were in India, then where was Pakistan? If they were in Pakistan, how come that only a short while ago they were in India? How could they be in India a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?’

shows absurdity and the last few lines depict the angst of the Sikh lunatic who spent his entire life waiting to be in his native place,

‘Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh let out a horrible scream.[...]On one side, behind barbed wire, stood together the lunatics of India and on the other side, behind more barbed wire, stood the lunatics of Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh’

Similar examples being,

“Two of them held burning oil torches, the others carried cans of kerosene oil and explosives. One of them asked Santokh, 'Sardar Ji, have you completed your assignment?'

The young man nodded.

'Should we then proceed with ours?' he asked.

'If you like,' he replied and walked away.” (The Assignment)

'Even dogs will now have to decide if they are Indian or Pakistani,' one of the soldiers observed.’ (The Dog of Tetwal)

Manto thus was the mirror that reflected the anguish and absurdity in the lives of the suppressed, oppressed and marginalized groups towards whom other writers could only show pity. Manto, with his work tries to put forth the stark and blotchy realities that people otherwise fail to point fearing alienation from the society. Braving all brunts he portrayed the naked and hurt countrymen who needed a desperate help for a better lives. Yet it was the craft of the scholar that without pointing out at any religion, country, sect or gender as the culprit of the suppressed he makes the readers ponder upon the ills of the society. That, is the magic of manto that is the absurdity of manto which gave partition literature the much needed works of art.

In conclusion, one cannot deny what Balraj Menra and Sharad Dutt wrote for him, “and Manto, he looks towards three directions all at once, the past, present and future, just like time’s unit and continuity is unbreakable and infinite similiary, man is an unbreakable truth” (Dastavez).

Thus Manto, looking ahead of his times forged stories that had a deep connection of the rustic past to the vulgar present and a dark future. Himself being termed an ‘other’ during his writing

period his works today connect him to almost everyone in the two countries divided during partition, highlighting his fate to be as absurd as the stories he carved to mock the insanity of the great divide.

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